

Vincent Edwards

Animated Enterprise

American producer works up a movie on Indian heritage hero

By RAMOLA TALWAR BADAM

An American filmmaker who worked on the animated series *Godzilla*, *Spiderman* and *Starship Troopers* has come to breathe life into a hero from India's ancient past.

Vincent Edwards brings his experience of directing American animated series to a feature he is working on with a team of Indian animators. But the identity of his Indian hero is still wrapped in mystery. All Edwards will reveal is that his main lead is as famous in India as Superman.

He shifted base from Los Angeles to Bangalore with his wife and three young children to work on the film being financed by an Indian investor.

"I was asked to work on this project by someone who was concerned that Indian culture would be lost in a mad, mad rush to Americanize, with the big interest in superheroes like Spiderman and Superman," he says. Edwards declines to provide any more details about the character or the expected release date.

"It's an Indian heritage project that will not alienate an American, European or Canadian audience," he says. "But first we'll make sure to get the attention of the Indian audience here and the thousands of NRI families."

Bollywood actors and actresses may provide the voices for characters in the film. "We are casting the voices and have identified a renowned composer to do some songs," he says. Edwards believes it is vital the project be entertaining. For a movie to succeed, he says it "needs to be about what people care

about and are entertained by."

He uses *The Incredibles* as an example. "It is a story about a typical American family, but they have superpowers. On one level it tells you about the American way of life, but it's an engaging story with characters you can relate to."

The huge popularity of the animated movie *Hanuman* also triggered the idea for the India project. "There is a huge domestic appetite for well-accomplished Indian animation projects," Edwards says. "There is a need to fill that demand, to resuscitate the cultural legacy."

But he has one grouse about the Indian animation industry—that it doesn't try hard enough or push animators and writers to reach their true potential.

"I think the large majority of animation products created in India for the Indian market is of a poor standard. They first assume that the audience has low expectations. It is 'good enough' is what you hear, says Edwards. "If what people see is a cheap model, they are shooting themselves in the foot. Nobody outside of India will ever watch it."

He says Indian animators need a better understanding of the story structure, how to engage the audience and hold its interest. "The Indian animation industry does not have a very firm grasp of the story structure, of the methodology. You need to give the audience that feeling of expectation."

He stresses the need for a powerful, moving storyline that keeps the audience entertained. "There is a need for content and something

will arise to fill the vacuum that exists. There are passionate and talented people here dedicated to animation as an art form."

Edwards believes that as the Indian audience is exposed to Western quality standards in filmmaking, people will be more demanding. "They won't buy stuff that doesn't pass muster and filmmakers will have to provide that world class edge."

As the Indian animation industry moves toward creating original content locally, Edwards says it is an exciting time to be in India. Entertainment giants such as Walt Disney have outsourced animation work to Indian companies over the past several years and studios from the United States and New Zealand have set up offices here.

Cheap labor costs attract firms to India. Half-an-hour of production work for animation costs about \$60,000 in India as against a steep \$250,000 to \$400,000 in Canada and the United States respectively, according to estimates from the Indian animation industry.

"The industry here is large, relatively inexpensive and it's savvy; so this creates a climate to do massive outsourcing co-production work in India," says Edwards. "But ultimately the talent pool reaches a critical mass. Then people start thinking, 'We understand how to do this. Why don't we do it ourselves?'"

He says the challenge for the Indian industry is to move from being a cheap production hub to a talent powerhouse.

"There are a lot of good studios

in India doing BPO [business process outsourcing] type of stuff. Right now the big challenge for India is to move from the BPO model to create its own IP [intellectual property] and its own brand. This will help it benefit from a bigger share of the pie; that's where the money is at."

Edwards says he knows of other Western producers and directors who have also come to India. "Smarter studios realize there is homegrown talent but without much experience. So the challenge is how to identify an idea is a good idea, develop it, visualize it and then identify a market," he says.

Edwards also enjoys being in India and observing the changes in the country during an economic boom. He says it is inspiring to see the determination with which India is attempting to scale up. Propelled by growing domestic demand and exports, the Indian economy is growing at a rate of about 8 percent a year.

His wife and their three children—aged seven, three and one-and-a-half—are settling in to life in India. "My wife likes yoga and I like chicken tikka," he says. But sometimes seeing disparities upsets them. "This is a hard country. While there are opportunities, the poverty is daunting," says Edwards. "But when you see huge bags of books that children carry to school everyday, you know that this is the way people in poverty will be raised up."

Ramola Talwar Badam is a Mumbai-based writer.

